

ANIMALS - BIRDS

ROBERT PREER

AROUND THE TOWNS



GLOBE PHOTO / BETHANY VERSOY

Dennis and Steve Peacock were looking for birds in Humarock for the annual Audubon Society Christmas Bird Count.

ONE BIRD, TWO BIRDS

Today is the official end of the 99th annual Christmas Bird Count sponsored continent-wide by Audubon societies — an attempt to tally all the species of birds seen in thousands of specific areas in one 24-hour period.

The annual event provides ornithologists with a rich treasure trove of information on changing bird populations from Canada to Central America, even though it does not meet strict scientific criteria for bird population studies.

Birders will be out on Nantucket and at various North Shore locations today, but last Sunday was the designated day for the South Shore count sponsored by Massachusetts

Audubon's Marshfield sanctuary.

David Clapp, executive director of Mass. Audubon's South Shore operations, said 44 birders participated. Broken up into 11 teams, each with an assigned sector of the total territory, they tallied 103 species, the second highest total in the 40-odd years that a Christmas Bird Count has been conducted in this area, Clapp said.

Conditions were ideal, said Clapp — extremely clear skies, calm and not too cold. "I could see the tower and buildings in Provincetown easily," said Clapp, "and the Plymouth-Kingston-Duxbury Bay area was flat as a mill pond. Not only could you see birds, you could see their reflections."

But perfect birding conditions weren't the only reason for the high count. "The exceptionally mild winter is the big reason for our seeing so many species, I think," said Clapp.

"Some birds haven't migrated south yet, or at least not as many as usual. We counted over 1,000 American robins, for example, and among several species that usually have headed south by now, we saw a dickcissel, which should be way south, somewhere in the jungles of Panama by now," said Clapp.

In all, he said, the 44 birders counted over 30,000 individual birds.

The territory was a circle with a 15-mile diameter. The circle, centered at Ocean Bluff in Marshfield, thus had radii extending 7.5 miles in all directions — so it included parts of Duxbury, Kingston, Pembroke, Hanover, Norwell, and Scituate. About 40 percent of the target area was beach and ocean habitat — Duxbury Beach, the Plymouth Bay complex, and a sizable area of Massachusetts Bay.

Among the unusual sightings were a lone American bald eagle, sighted near the Route 3 bridge over the North River; and several oceanic birds, including a razorbill, which is a black-and-white, puffin-like bird about the size of a football; a thick-billed murre; and a black guillemot.